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DE RUEHBK #0756/01 0381014

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FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000756

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PACOM FOR FPA HUSO
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/08/2017

TAGS: PREL MARR PGOV TH

SUBJECT: THAILAND: GEN SONTHI DISCUSSES CURRENT EVENTS

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (a and d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Council for National Security (CNS) head General Sonthi Boonyaratglin admitted to the Ambassador on Feb 6 his frustration with Cabinet members, especially Finance Minister Pridyathorn Devakula, who have their own agendas. Sonthi is confident that a new Constitution will be drafted on time and that elections will be held before the end of the year. Although he claims to remain close to recently ousted National Police chief General Kowit Watana, Sonthi believes Kowit was simply not up to the job of managing the police. Sonthi expects to meet with PM Surayud Chulanont soon to determine whether a recent Time Magazine interview of former PM Thaksin Shinawatra might be grounds for legal charges of lese majeste. Sonthi believes that, by emphasizing greed and consumer spending, Thaksin appealed to the baser instincts of the Thai people and that, much like Thailand's recently defeated soccer team, the Thai people need more discipline. End Summary.

MARTIAL LAW AND ELECTIONS

¶2. (C) In a February 6 dinner at the Residence, GEN Sonthi, accompanied by his Chief of Personal Staff GEN Chirapong Vanarat, Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence LTG Kasem Yuktavira, Director of Intelligence MG Sirichai Distakul and Director of Operations MG Aksara Kerdphol, was relaxed and open. In a pre-dinner pull-aside with Sonthi, the Ambassador pressed for the lifting of martial law in those parts of the country where it was not present before the coup and asked that the CNS not permit any slippage in the Thai timetable for drafting a new Constitution and holding a general election. In the pull-aside and later at dinner, Sonthi expressed confidence that the Constitution will be drafted in time and that elections will be held before the end of the year. On martial law, however, he was less sanguine. Sonthi pointed to recent school burnings in places like Buriram as justification for maintaining martial law. The Ambassador countered by suggesting Sonthi make the case for maintaining martial law in places suffering from violence and lifting it elsewhere. Sonthi was noncommittal.

WHY CAN'T BUREAUCRATS BE GOOD SOLDIERS?

¶13. (C) Sonthi expressed exasperation with many members of Thailand's "old ginger" Cabinet. "In the military if I tell a subordinate to do something, he does it; when he has an initiative, he clears it with me first," Sonthi said. In contrast, Cabinet members, many of whom were formerly bureaucrats in the ministries they now oversee, act like they are "doing the regime a favor" by deigning to be part of the government. Sonthi was especially frustrated with Finance and Deputy Prime Minister Pridyathorn Devakula who frequently goes "off on his own" to make policies that undermine the economy.

SURAYUD IS A DECENT MAN ... IS HE TOUGH ENOUGH?

¶14. (C) Although careful to describe him as a "decent man above reproach," Sonthi also expressed mild frustration with PM Surayud for being unwilling to rein in his Cabinet. Sonthi suggested that Surayud's reluctance is based upon Surayud's strong belief that the interim Prime Minister should have a very limited role. Sonthi reminded the Ambassador that he had twice offered Surayud the Prime Ministership -- which he twice refused -- before Surayud agreed to return to government.

DO THEY HAVE THE GOODS ON THAKSIN?

¶15. (C) Sonthi said that Surayud had called him to set up a meeting to discuss whether the recent Time Magazine interview of Thaksin in which Thaksin allegedly questioned the wisdom of the King's "sufficiency economy" theory might constitute grounds for bringing legal charges for lese majeste. Sonthi was unsure but hopeful that grounds could be found.

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POLICY IN THE SOUTH

¶16. (C) Sonthi expressed his conviction that his new policy in the South of emphasizing civil affairs projects, education and enforcing the rule of law was winning support among the general population in the region, but noted it was also provoking more violence. LTG Kasem believes that the RTG's policy should combine a "soft" strategic policy aimed at winning hearts and minds with a "hard" tactical policy of swiftly attacking those who commit violence. Sonthi indicated that many of the hard core perpetrators of violence were young people who studied radical violence elsewhere. Sonthi and his aides stressed that, while they support dialogue with disaffected southerners, they remain military men and will continue military operations. Sonthi also underscored his belief that the government can reduce the violence, but added, given the century of unrest in the region, some level of disturbances will likely continue for years to come.

KOWIT SACKING

¶17. (C) Turning to the recent ouster of former National Police chief General Kowit Watana, Sonthi claimed that Kowit remains a close friend but was simply not up to the task of reforming the police. Sonthi's staff was less refrained, they were visibly pleased by Kowit's downfall -- Chirapong giving a big thumbs up sign at the mention of Kowit's sacking. Sonthi noted continued institutional conflicts separating the police and army. Several members of his staff indicated it is unclear how, if ever, the police will be reformed.

SONTHI'S TRIP TO CHINA

¶18. (C) Sonthi said he was treated well by his hosts during his January 21-24 visit to Beijing. In addition to meeting with senior PLA officials, Sonthi said that the Chinese made a great production about his being able to meet Vice President Zeng Qinghong. Sonthi said the meeting with Zeng was basically small talk and not substantive. The Ambassador

noted how the PRC hopes to increase its influence within the Thai military. Sonthi agreed but added quickly that "it's not realistic to think China can replace the United States with us."

BUT THEY'LL STILL NEVER MAKE THE WORLD CUP

¶9. (C) Several times Sonthi expressed frustration with the Thai people's lack of seriousness, once joking that "the only problem with Thailand is the Thai people." Soccer enthusiast Sonthi said that the Thai people needed more discipline and suffered from the same problem the Thai national soccer team has -- an inability to play like a team. (Note: The Thai national team recently lost a highly emotional match to Singapore that drew national attention. End Note.) During the Thaksin era, he complained, the people were seduced by state-sponsored appeals to greed and rampant consumer spending. This appeal to man's baser instincts will be hard to overcome, he noted.

BOYCE